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Slave Laborers Believed Laying Soviet Pipeline

Secret intelligence reports portray an awesome human epic unfolding in Siberia. A long, lonely stream of slave laborers—tens of thousands of faceless men, existing on starches and water—are working from dawn to dusk, laying the Siberian pipeline.

The reports describe the workers as Soviet prisoners sentenced to forced labor and Vietnamese "volunteers" shipped to Siberia to help pay off Vietnam's debts. They reportedly are working under grim conditions for bare subsistence.

Our European allies are supplying vital equipment for the pipeline construction, which makes them indirect partners in this massive crime against human rights.

Of course, the Kremlin doesn't permit the Moscow Evening News to film the brutal conditions for all the world to see. So hard proof is lacking to bring formal charges against the Soviet taskmasters.

But letters from the Vietnamese laborers, postmarked in the Soviet Union, have reached the outside world. U.S. intelligence agencies have also put together other jigsaw pieces that form an appalling por-

trait of human exploitation. The State Department has been the most cautious about accepting the intelligence findings. Its Bureau of Intelligence and Research published a classified summary a few months ago citing reports—with no conclusions—that the Soviets are using slave labor to construct the controversial pipeline.

But the Human Rights Bureau, insiders say, is convinced of the terrible truth. Pentagon intelligence experts also believe the evidence is compelling.

Intelligence sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado that the Soviets don't even hide the fact that Vietnamese "volunteers" are working in the Soviet Union. The precise number could be as high as 100,000.

The sources insist, however, that the youths are not volunteers at all, but are sent to Siberia against their will to work in the harsh environment. According to one report, many are children of families that opposed the Viet Cong during the war.

Sen. William L. Armstrong (R-Colo.) has received several letters from Vietnamese emigres who have heard from relatives about the victimization of the laborers. Some letters have actually slipped through the Iron Curtain.

"It is already two months since I last heard from my family in Vietnam," wrote one desolate captive. "I do not know what the future has in store for me . . . I am being tightly

controlled . . . The pay is very low and living conditions in this infamous area are cruel . . . My life here is several times poorer and harsher than in Vietnam."

He tells of dreaming vainly of ways to escape, and closes with this poignant plea: "Can you spare some money? Can you send me a few clothes? I tell you truly, I have just two sets of clothes and two pairs of shoes and one woolen sweater and one nylon coat and one fur hat. Just that to get me through the winter."

Those Were the Days: Now that the fighting in Beirut has died down, authorities are fondly recalling the friendly arrangement that existed between Israel and Lebanon before the civil war erupted in 1975.

Until then, a top secret CIA document records, there was an "unwritten agreement" between military forces facing each other on the border to deliberately fire off-target when Israeli patrols penetrated Lebanon to raid PLO nests.

"The Lebanese reaction to Israeli patrols [was] normally limited to two rounds of artillery fire deliberately intended to miss a target by about 500 meters. If the rounds [came] too close, the Israelis return[ed] the fire—also deliberately inaccurate—as a 'reminder.'"

The report also said this agreement allowed Lebanon to "maintain the politically expedient fiction that it [was] reacting to the Israeli incursion."